

THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR

ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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ALEXIA.

BY ELEANOR C. PRICE,
Author of "Gerald."

CHAPTER I.

THE last day of the old year was dark, and short, and gloomy everywhere. A sky covered with thick gray clouds hung low over the fields; all nature was still; the earth was bound up in a hard black frost; the air was biting; the world seemed dead. And Christmas had been so different, so beautiful, with a clear sun and a blue sky, and a soft, spring-like air. The hounds had met at the Old Farm on the 26th of December, and they had found in Briar Coppice, half a mile away, and had had a famous run across country, Alexia Page leading, as her way was, on the little brown mare which her father had trained for her. And then, in the midst of it all, came the end. Lil, the faultless, the sure-footed, had stumbled into a rabbit-hole, and had thrown her rider, and dragged her half across the field. So Alexia was picked up covered with bruises, though no bones were broken; half stunned, but just conscious enough to know who carried her home. When they reached the Farm she could have looked up to thank him, but she would not; partly, perhaps, because she was ashamed of a certain depth of happiness which made the bruises nothing; partly because of a vexatious pride caused by circumstances. She thought her father would thank him quite enough.

But it was a terrible business after all. To lie in bed for several days, suffering the aches and pains which made themselves felt keenly enough now; to see nobody but her father and the servants, and old Dr. Smith, and Mrs. Dodd, the clergyman's wife, who, good woman as she was, did not hide the conviction that it served

her right; to miss hunting days, and now skating days, and last night the ball at the Manor, where Charlie Melville, the squire, would have devoted himself to her in spite of everybody—it was all too hard! But the deepest depth of misery had not been reached till this dark afternoon, the day after the ball, the last day of the old year.

Her father had helped her downstairs to the large sofa by the drawing-room fire. A great fire roared up the old-fashioned chimney, and all day the red light flickered on the low ceiling with its heavy beams, and the walls cumbered with quaint pieces of furniture. Through that long twilight day brass corners went on flashing, and there was a certain vagueness about the corners of the room, and to any one approaching from outside there was a friendly glow from the deep oriel window, adding a look of comfort to the beauty of the house. It was a beautiful old house, with a long red front and two red gables, and a porch projecting in the middle, and a fine gravel sweep approaching it from the high road; the yards, and farm-buildings, and haystacks lying snugly away behind, and being entered by a different road altogether.

There lay Alexia in a warm, quiet dream, staring at the fire, protected by a screen from the outer world. She was very stiff, and could hardly stand or walk; she was an ill-used girl, and could not understand why this Christmas, the Christmas of her life, should have been so utterly spoilt for her. And yet she was a most unreasonable little soul, for Charlie Melville had been to the house every day to enquire for her, and deep down in her heart she knew that he cared for her. But deeper still there was a little bitter something that said: "No, it won't do. It was all very well three years ago,

and longer ago still, when Charlie was a younger son, a mere sailor-boy; but now that his brother is dead, and he is the squire, and the manor and the farm belong to him, is it likely that he will be able to keep absurd old promises—childish promises?—Why, you little fool! he has forgotten them already, though, of course, he can't help thinking you the prettiest girl in the country. A tenant's daughter, a farmer's daughter, who is she? even though her mother was the Rector's only child, and her father has been to college, and her people have lived at the Old Farm two hundred years, as long as the Melvilles at the Manor." Then Alexia answered that biting manner, and said in her heart: "Still Charlie loves me—though, of course, not half or a quarter as much—but he carried me home, and I know."

But the argument was unsatisfactory, as most things are when one is aching all over; and Alexia was glad to see Mrs. Dodd, who came tramping in full of health and virtue, dressed in a plain serge gown, a large cloth jacket, and round black hat: the very picture of a country rector's wife visiting her sick parishioners.

Alexia lifted herself up on the sofa; her pale delicate face, and soft dark curly head seemed to look wistfully out of the background of some old picture. She held out a thin little hand, as hot as fire, to be clasped in Mrs. Dodd's knitted glove.

"How kind of you to come out on such a cold day!" said Alexia. "If you wouldn't mind pushing my table one inch away, that little chair will just fit in between it and me."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Dodd. She looked doubtfully at the table, which had flowers on it, and scent, and a basket of bonbons, and two or three books and Christmas numbers, whose character she suspected. "Thank you, I won't come so near the fire. This room is very hot, do you know, Alice. Have you had the window open to-day?"

"Before I came down. Dr. Smith says I must be careful about chills," said Alexia, and her visitor sat down where she pleased, which was a long way off.

The attitude of Mrs. Dodd's mind towards Alexia Page was one of disapproval. She could not despise the girl, whom everybody respected; she could not dislike anyone so pretty, with so much tact and such nice manners; she was not small-minded enough to envy the height of popularity to which Alexia's generosity, justice, and

pleasant ways had lifted her among the poor. Yet certainly she did not like her. Alexia held a sort of position in the place which was entirely her own, and Mrs. Dodd failed to see any reason for it. She was the old Rector's granddaughter—the old Rector had been a gentleman and a scholar, neither of which was Mr. Dodd—but what did that matter, when her mother had chosen to lower herself by marrying William Page? Mrs. Page had been a very foolish, wrong-minded woman, in Mrs. Dodd's opinion. She had known nothing of the management of a farm, and had rather gloried in her ignorance. She had all sorts of ridiculous, fine-lady ways, such as dining at seven o'clock. Latterly she had set up for being an invalid, and had seldom come down before the middle of the day. Mr. Page, poor man, was fond of books and fond of horses. He was extravagant; he was a careless, refined sort of man; it was quite impossible, according to Mrs. Dodd, that he could make his farm pay. Yet somehow these two got on very comfortably; they were in love with each other to the last; they had a singular faculty of winning the devotion of their servants, both in and out of doors; and Alexia, at a very early age, ruled them, the servants, the horses, the dogs, the farm, with an authority founded on reason and independence of character. Poor Alexia! She was much prettier than her mother, and cleverer than her father, even in his own lines of horses and books; her inborn taste was excellent, and she had all the practical good sense on which her ancestors had prospered, with a tolerably strong love of the vanities of life as well.

Her mother died when Alexia was fourteen, and Mrs. Dodd then tried to take the management of the girl, but failed. She could only comfort herself by calling her Alice, instead of the foolish, fanciful name which her mother had given her. She kept up this custom carefully, and thus by a small daily provocation missed any chance she might ever have had of making friends with the girl.

Alexia's constant companionship with Charlie Melville, when he was at home, had always been an offence and an anxiety to Mrs. Dodd. She used to wonder that Mrs. Melville did not interfere; but in those days Mrs. Melville could think of nothing but the looks, the manners, the debts, the scrapes of her eldest son George, who had given her every possible trouble that a son could give his mother. He had

ended by marrying a third-rate actress, and three years ago had died, fortunately leaving no children. Since then his widow had married again.

For a long time Mrs. Melville stayed away from the Manor, but at last she came back, bringing Charlie with her. He had left the navy, and everyone said he was a good fellow. He was not very bright, and easily influenced, like his brother; but his natural tendency was good instead of bad. He was affectionate and generous, and, for a young man, unselfish. His mother took a great deal of interest in him now, but she did not love him as she had loved George, who had done his best to break her heart. There was something a little simple, a little stupid, about Charlie; he was a bear, his mother said, and she was very often angry with him. One thing she was resolved upon: that he should marry well; and the idea of Alexia Page as a daughter-in-law had not, of course, ever crossed her mind. The ball might have opened her eyes; but Alexia was not at the ball.

"How did it go off? Please tell me all about it," said Alexia to Mrs. Dodd, who had been there.

"Oh, very well indeed!" said Mrs. Dodd. "Everybody was there, and the rooms looked very handsome. I believe Mrs. Melville was quite satisfied; in fact she said so. Of course we came away early, for I don't like late hours, and I would not have gone to a ball anywhere else."

"Were there any pretty dresses?" said Alexia, gazing at her with eyes full of sad imagination.

"No doubt you would have thought them all pretty," said Mrs. Dodd. "I don't know. I am not clever at describing that sort of thing."

"And everybody was there?" repeated Alexia, rather vaguely.

Mrs. Dodd exerted herself, and gave a long list of names and families: her bare outline was enough for Alexia to make pictures from. She knew them all, at least by sight and by name; she knew who Charlie would dance with, and how bored he would be, and how little he would have to say to most of them; she had a little triumphant suspicion that the evening had been spoilt for him, as well as for her. At last, among the various groups, she thought of some people who had always been friends of the Melvilles, and whose daughter, a plain girl with a good deal of money, had been long ago intended by the respective parents to marry George.

"Were not the Martin Radcliffes there, Mrs. Dodd?" said she.

"Of course. Didn't I mention them?" said Mrs. Dodd. "That was funny, because they were much more conspicuous than anybody else. I quite expect—in fact Mrs. Melville hinted as much—but I won't gossip. It is better not to talk about things before they come to pass."

Mrs. Dodd, at the same time, did not mean to stick to this excellent principle.

"A fine lesson for Alice Page," she thought. "It is a pity she was not there to see for herself."

Alexia herself did not affect any blindness or stupidity on the subject. A slight shiver crept over her, and she turned a little pale, but Mrs. Dodd could not see that in the twilight.

"And did Mr. Melville dance with Miss Radcliffe a great deal?" she asked quietly.

Mrs. Dodd was rather glad to have this opportunity of telling the worst. The girl had brought it on herself; she had actually asked for it; she deserved it—for what business had she to enquire with whom the Squire did or did not dance?

"That is what I meant, of course," said she. "Everybody was talking about it. He danced with her over and over again, and hardly spoke to anybody else all the evening. I thought it was hardly the thing to be so entirely devoted to one girl, but of course, as Mrs. Williams said to me, it would be such a good thing, such a desirable thing, such a comfort to Mrs. Melville, such a blessing to the neighbourhood—because, you know, besides other considerations, poor George spent such fabulous sums, and Miss Radcliffe will have an immense fortune, and everybody speaks well of her."

"How did she look?" said Alexia meekly, after a moment's pause; and that was the only dart of feminine spite she allowed herself. It fell short, too.

"Very well," answered Mrs. Dodd, with emphasis. "She was most handsomely dressed in yellow, with large wreaths of brown leaves. Her figure is improved, she is certainly slighter than she was, and holds herself better. If she had a clearer complexion, and better teeth, and rather more hair of a more decided colour, and a differently shaped nose, I really think she would be a good-looking girl. Many people said so last night."

Alexia gave a little laugh. How well she remembered Charlie saying to her, a

long time ago, what an awful fright Miss Radcliffe was! And then she scolded him, and then he began to talk nonsense, as usual. But a younger son, a midshipman, could afford to talk nonsense; it was very long ago. Now, perhaps, Charlie took different views of things. Mrs. Dodd no doubt spoke the truth when she described his devotion to Miss Radcliffe; Alexia did not think of disbelieving her. Miss Radcliffe was a stick, as well as a fright; there were other people at the ball of quite as much distinction; he must have had some reason for singling her out in such a pointed way. "And if I had been there, I wonder—" thought Alexia, and she smiled. She felt sore and stiff, somehow, but Mrs. Dodd saw no outward sign of this; she went on talking and asking questions, in a much more lively manner than before, till at last the Rector's wife, very well satisfied with her charitable visit, got up and went away.

Then the soreness and stiffness became unbearable, and Alexia hid her face in the cushion, with set teeth and clenched hands, wishing wild wishes, poor child! wondering how she was to bear the bitter pain with which Mrs. Dodd had so lightly threatened her. She thought now, forgetting former reasonings, that from the bottom of her heart she had believed in Charlie, and that he was going to be false to her. In the darkening afternoon the corners grew more indistinct, and the fire flamed up brighter. Alexia lay fighting with herself, pitying and yet half hating herself, for she had as much pride and fine instinct as any Miss Radcliffe in the world.

Then the door opened, the maid announced somebody, and Charlie Melville came into the room.

on his knees waiting to hail him king. Next day the silent and expectant multitudes thronging the streets of London town were duly informed that, by the grace of God, George Augustus Guelph had succeeded to the throne of Great Britain and Ireland as George the Second.

The sudden death of the late king, and the proclamation of the new, caused a prodigious sensation among statesmen, courtiers, and place-hunters. The favourites of his late majesty were heavy at heart, knowing their day of triumph had passed for ever; the followers of the present monarch were filled with joy, believing their hour of exaltation was at hand. The court end of the town presented a scene of vast excitement. By night and by day the state-rooms of Leicester House, situated in Leicester Square, where the prince and princess had lived since their banishment from St. James's, and to which they now returned from Richmond, were thronged by most loyal crowds anxious to kiss their majesties' hands. The square outside presented an unusually brilliant spectacle which, phantasmagoria-like, changed continually, without loss of colour and with gain of variety; for here were gathered together courtiers, politicians, gossips, soldiers, citizens, players, poets, pamphleteers, coachmen, chairmen, and footmen, all busy with unquiet speculation as to what alteration in the affairs of state this new reign would produce.

Now, amongst those who looked forward with impatient anxiety to a profitable place in the new establishment of their majesties' household, was John Gay the poet. He was a man who in his time had played many parts, and had for upwards of fourteen years posed as a courtier in the drawing rooms of the late Prince and Princess of Wales. Born of an ancient and worthy Derbyshire family, he had been bred a mercer; had served the imperious Duchess of Monmouth as secretary; and had travelled into Holland with my Lord Clarendon in a like capacity. Returning to England with his lordship on the accession of George the First, he had written a poem regarding the new Princess of Wales, describing her to the English ladies before she came over. This effusion, under the guise of loyal homage, shaped itself to a courteous petition for a place; it resulted in procuring him the favour of her he addressed, without gaining him the reward he expected. How-

SOME FAMOUS PLAYS.

I.

JOHN GAY'S "BEGGAR'S OPERA."

ON the afternoon of the twelfth day of June, in the year of grace 1727, Sir Robert Walpole, then prime minister of England, rode in hot haste to Richmond in order to inform the Prince of Wales that his father, George the First, had died suddenly at Osnaburg. History narrates that, roused from the customary nap which an early and over-hearty dinner was wont to induce, the new monarch tumbled out of bed, and rushed into the antechamber breeches in hand, where he found the great minister

ever, he became regular in his attendance at court, and subsequently formed one of that gay and gracious assembly of wits, gallants, and beauties which gave a character for brilliancy, politeness, and pleasure to the drawing rooms of Leicester House, such as had been unknown to the English court since the days of the Merry Monarch.

Here the blond and stately princess was surrounded by her fair maids of honour, foremost amongst whom were the piquant Mary Bellenden and the charming Molly Lepel, both possessing a character for winsomeness and beauty. Here too assembled such notable figures as my Lord Chesterfield, wittiest of wits, most courteous of courtiers; my Lord John Hervey, surnamed the "handsome," a superfine gentleman, daintily rouged, elegantly ruffled, and delicately perfumed; the Duchess of Queensberry, eccentric in speech and dress; the mad Duchess of Buckingham, who hatched foolish plots for the return of the exiled Stuarts; Dean Swift, who made sharp speeches to the princess; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who engaged the amorous attentions of the prince; and young Colonel Campbell, then secretly married to Mary Bellenden, whom he afterwards raised to be Duchess of Argyle.

Notwithstanding his constant attendance at court, and his loyal homage to the princess, Gay remained unrewarded.

"I have been considering," writes Dean Swift to him, "why poets have such ill success in making their court, since they are allowed to be the greatest and best of all flatterers. The defect is that they flatter only in print or in writing, but not by word of mouth. They will give things under their hand which they make a conscience of speaking. Besides, they are too libertine to haunt antechambers, too poor to bribe porters and footmen, and too proud to cringe to second-hand favourites in a great family."

Gay's attendance at court was actuated by constant expectation of reward; but whilst hope sustained his poetic soul it entirely failed to nourish his corpulent body, or to enable him to dress in "silver loops and garments blue," according to his vain desires.

That he might live he therefore wooed the muses, and wrote poems and plays which had more or less success: more where his poems—the subscription for which realised him one thousand pounds—were concerned; less with regard to his

plays. One of these, *The Wife of Bath*, was damned at its birth; whilst his burlesque farce, *What D'ye Call It*, and his tragedy, *The Captives*, were short-lived, though patronised by royalty.

Some of his friends in office had, however, proved kind, and in 1723 he had been appointed Commissioner of the State Lottery, a post he held for two years, and then lost at the instance of Sir Robert Walpole, who believed him to have written a pamphlet dealing severely with Government measures.

Now the prince and princess had come to the throne, Gay's hopes revived. In order to keep his memory green in the hearts of royalty, he had written a book of very ingenious fables in verse for the amusement and instruction of Prince William, afterwards known to his generation as "Billy the Butcher"; and, in reference to the story of the Hare and Many Friends, the princess told Mrs. Howard, her bed-chamber woman, that she would take up the hare, and bade her put her in mind of Mr. Gay when the household came to be settled. Hearing of this gracious speech, he believed himself on the broad road to certain honour and high reward.

Endowed with the poetic temperament, his moods of hope and dejection followed each other as regularly as light and shadow on April days; and now his expectations were at their meridian. Perhaps it was his sanguine disposition, together with a certain simplicity of character, which enabled him to make his way quickly to the hearts of those with whom he came in contact. Pope, who had "seen too much of his good qualities to be anything less than his friend," described him to Spence as "quite a natural man, wholly without art or design, who spoke just what he thought, and as he thought it"; and Swift, who loved him likewise, gave it as his opinion that Providence never intended the poet "to be above two-and-twenty by his thoughtlessness and gullibility."

The royal household in due time was settled, and Gay, after fourteen long years' attendance at court, "with a large stock of real merit, a modest and agreeable conversation, a hundred promises, and five hundred friends," was offered the post of usher to the Princess Louisa, who had then reached the mature age of ten years. Though this post was worth £200 a year, Gay rejected it with indignation, abandoned St. James's, and forswore courtly servility for evermore. "The queen's family

is at last settled," he writes to Dean Swift, then in Ireland, "and in the list I was appointed Gentleman Usher to the Princess Louisa, the youngest princess; which, upon account that I am so far advanced in life, I have declined accepting. So now all my expectations have vanished, and I have no prospect but in depending wholly upon myself and my own conduct. As I am used to disappointments I can bear them; but as I can have no more hopes, can no more be disappointed, so that I am in a blessed condition." The poor dean had suffered much the same sore vexations at the hands of statesmen and courtiers as Gay now endured; and was quick to sympathise with him. He therefore wrote back he entirely approved of his refusing the appointment, and by way of comforting the poet, hoped he might soon obtain some other situation which "will be better circumstantiated."

Pope likewise sought to soothe Gay's chagrin, and reminded him he had often repeated a ninth beatitude for his benefit: "Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed." Instead of feeling regret, he continues, he could find it in his heart to congratulate him on a happy dismissal from all court dependence. "I dare say," he adds, "I shall find you the better and the honester man for it many years hence; very probable the healthfuller and the cheerfuller into the bargain. You are happily rid of many cursed ceremonies as well as of many ill and vicious habits, of which few or no men escape the infection who are hackneyed or trammelled in the ways of a court. Princes indeed, and peers, the lackies of princes, and ladies, the fools of peers, will smile on you the less, but men of worth and real friends will look on you the better."

Gay's depression did not continue long, for it happened he had at this critical time just finished his *Beggar's Opera*, which was soon destined to create a prodigious sensation throughout the kingdom. Eleven years previously, a hint, which served as the germ for this opera, had been conveyed to him in a letter Swift wrote to Pope. There was a young, ingenious Quaker living in Dublin who penned verses to his mistress, "not very correct, but in a strain purely what a poetical Quaker should do, commending her look and habit." This set Swift thinking a set of Quaker pastorals might succeed, and he asks Pope to hear what their friend Gay says on the subject. "I believe farther,"

he continues, "the pastoral ridicule is not exhausted, and that a porter, footman, or chairman's pastoral might do well. Or what think you of a Newgate pastoral amongst the thieves?" Later on, as we learn from Pope, Swift said to Gay, "What an odd pretty sort of thing a Newgate pastoral might make!"

Gay was inclined to think a comedy having its scenes laid in the famous prison might be better still, and hence the origin of *The Beggar's Opera*. "He began on it," says Pope, "and, when first he mentioned it to Swift, the doctor did not much like the project. As he carried it on he showed what he wrote to both of us; and we now and then gave a correction, or a word or two of advice, but it was wholly of his own writing. When it was done, neither of us thought it would succeed. We showed it to Congreve, who, after reading it over, said, 'It would either take greatly, or be damned confoundedly!'"

Gay attributed his bitter disappointment, on being offered an uiership to a royal baby, not to the Queen, but to Sir Robert Walpole, who had previously ousted him from his commissionership. In this opinion he was strengthened by Swift, who hinted Sir Robert was his keen enemy, whereon the pious dean prayed God to forgive him; "but not," says he, in safe reservation, "until he puts himself in a state to be forgiven." Feeling grievously injured Gay therefore determined to avenge his wrongs on courtiers and ministers in general, and the prime minister in particular. Therefore, though his opera was finished, he skilfully changed it so as to compare, as Swift says, "the common robbers of the public, and their several stratagems of betraying, undermining, and hanging each other, to the several arts of the politicians in times of corruption." Moreover he pointed his dialogue sufficiently to sting the man he considered his enemy; added verses satirising the court; and introduced a scene in which two notorious rascals, Lockit and Peachum, wrangle, in commemoration of a similar occurrence which a little while before had taken place in public between Walpole and Pulteney. Time has of course served to blunt many of the speeches of their original sharpness, but we can well imagine how such sentences as that in which Peachum tells Lockit their employment as go-betweens for thieves "may be reckoned dishonest because, like great statesmen, we encourage those who betray their friends," must have

galled the men for whom they were intended.

When *The Beggar's Opera* was quite finished it was offered to Colley Cibber and his brother managers of Drury Lane, who promptly rejected it; whereon it was carried to John Rich, at this time proprietor of Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre. Rich accepted the play, speedily put it in rehearsal, and on the 29th of January, 1728, printed the following announcement in the "Daily Post":

Never Before Acted

By the Company of Comedians
At the Theatre Royal in Lincoln's Inn
Fields.

The present Monday being the 29th day
of January, will be Performed

THE BEGGAR'S OPERA.

Boxes, 5s. ; Pit, 3s. ; Gallery, 2s.

On the first night of its first representation Gay's many friends assembled at the old playhouse in the Fields, being much concerned for the success of his opera, and determined to give it what support they could. Moreover there was a vast crowd of women of quality and men of parts present, whom curiosity or the hope of diversion had drawn to this end of the town. The piece commended itself in the strongest manner to popular taste, inasmuch as rumour set forth it sparkled with wit slightly screening innuendo, and ridiculed morality in the freest manner. On the other hand a ballad opera was a form of entertainment new to the public, and there was no knowing how it might be received. Pope tells us he and Gay's friends were in great uncertainty at its first production, "till," says he, "we were very much encouraged by overhearing the Duke of Argyle, who sat in the next box to us, saying, 'It will do,—it must do; I see it in the eyes of them.' This was a good while before the first act was over, and so gave us ease soon. For the duke, besides his own good taste, has a more particular knack than any one now living in discovering the taste of the public. He was quite right in this as usual; the good-nature of the audience appeared stronger and stronger every act, and ended in a clamour of applause."

The success of the opera was assured before the curtain fell, for the acclamations which rang through the house were said to be "the greatest ever known." The sensation it created elicited a criticism from the *Daily Journal* two days later, a most

rare occurrence and certain sign of distinction in those days. "On Monday," this notice says, "was represented for the first time at the Theatre Royal in Lincoln's Inn Fields, Mr. Gay's English opera, written in a manner wholly new, and very entertaining, there being introduced, instead of Italian airs, above sixty of the most celebrated old English and Scotch tunes. There was present then, as well as last night, a prodigious concourse of nobility and gentry; and no theatrical performance for these many years has met with so much applause."

The excitement it caused throughout the length and breadth of the town was indeed remarkable. The exterior of Lincoln's Inn Fields Playhouse presented a scene of vast confusion nightly. Crowds blocked the doors hours previous to their opening; linkboys, chairmen, and footmen wrangled to make place for their masters and employers; orange-women cried their wares in shrill tones; ballad singers droned and sold songs of the opera; sedans jostled each other amidst the curses of their Hibernian carriers; and the constant and heavy roll of ponderous coaches added to the general noise and bustle. Inside the theatre men of all parties and women of every condition assembled; ministers who were ridiculed came to protest their indifference to satire by laughing with the crowd; and grave clergymen, doffing their bands and gowns, sat disguised in the pit amongst saucy coxcombs.

For sixty-three consecutive nights *The Beggar's Opera* was performed in the season, a rare distinction in times when three nights was the average run of a play. Nor was this all. It drove the Italian opera, which it burlesqued, out of town; its songs were sung in every drawing-room; and its verses printed on the fans of women of quality. Its fame spread from the capital all over the kingdom, it was played in all the larger towns in England, and finally made its way to Scotland, Wales, and Ireland.

"We are as full of it," writes Dean Swift from Dublin to the successful author, "'pro modulo nostro,' as London can be; continually acting, and houses crammed, and the Lord Lieutenant several times there, laughing his heart out. We hear a million of stories about the opera, of the applause of the song when two great ministers were in a box together, and all the world staring at them."

No doubt a part of the success was due

to the vivacious and witty manner in which the characters of the hero and heroine were played by Walker and Lavinia Fenton. At first the part of Captain Macheath was offered by the author to James Quin, who had, as Davies tells us, "so happy an ear for music, and was so famous for singing with ease a common ballad or catch"; but after a short trial at rehearsal Quin gave it up, "from despair of acquitting himself with the dis-solute gaiety and bold vigour of deportment necessary to the character." It was then offered to Walker, who though he had but an indifferent voice and could barely sing in tune, acted with so much drollery that he gave entire satisfaction to author and audience alike.

In the character of the heroine, Polly Peachum, Miss Fenton gained both fame and fortune, as will hereafter be narrated. Up to this time she had in no way raised herself above her theatrical contemporaries, and was merely noted as an actress possessing a vivacious spirit and a fascinating beauty, both of which she had exhibited on the stage of Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre, for the sum of fifteen shillings weekly. But the part of Polly Peachum affording full scope for her talents, her innate grace, her winning archness, and seductive ways, vastly delighted the town and caused Rich to double her salary.

The story of her life of twenty summers was calculated to heighten the interest her performance inspired. The daughter of a gay young naval officer, named Beswick, she had come into the world in the year 1708, whilst he was sailing on the seas. Soon after her mother, yearning for congenial companionship, married one Fenton in the Old Bailey; but being "a woman of a popular spirit," she soon set up a coffee-house near Charing Cross. Here her little daughter Lavinia, a vivacious child, became a favourite of the fops, who taught her snatches of such playhouse songs as it was the pleasure of these pretty gentlemen to hum, whilst sipping their coffee or making love to her mamma. To this coffee-house came likewise an actor from the old house, who, hearing her sing, took some interest in giving her instructions in music, and she being apt her progress repaid him for his pains.

In the next chapter of her life we find Miss Fenton at a boarding-school, where she was made love to by a gallant spark from the Inner Temple, who, by bribing the porter, gained admittance to the garden attached to the polite academy for young

ladies. Here he pledged vows of eternal love to his adored Lavinia. This, however, was but a school-girl's romance; indeed but a mere prelude to episodes of the same interesting complexion; for, no sooner had she left the Academy, than she fell in love with a Portuguese nobleman. This lover behaved so liberally to her that he was soon carried to the Fleet; from which scene of durance vile the grateful Lavinia, by the sale of her jewels, was enabled to release him. Soon after, in 1726, she, being now in her eighteenth year, found her way through the stage door of the new theatre in the Haymarket, then under the management of Huddy. Here she made her curtesy to the town, which received her with considerable applause; for having, as a contemporary critic said, "a lively imagination, joined with a good memory, a clear voice, and a graceful mien, she seemed as if nature had designed her for the pleasure of mankind in such performances as are exhibited at our theatre!"

The great triumph of her career was, however, reserved for her appearance in *The Beggar's Opera*, in which she was pronounced inimitable. With her gray eyes sparkling with merriment, her softly-rounded cheeks suffused with blushes, her cherry lips parted in smiles, her graceful form bending to a curtesy, she came forward night after night to receive universal applause. When the enthusiasm had subsided, and she had spoken the first lines of her part declaring a woman knew how to be mercenary, though she had never been in a court or at an assembly, she broke into the song "Virgins are like the fair flow'r in its lustre," and by her piquancy completed the fascination her appearance had begun. Her name was on all men's lips; her pictures were engraved and sold in great numbers; books of letters and verses to her were published, and pamphlets made even of her sayings and jests.

Amongst those who sat nightly in one of the stage boxes at Lincoln's Inn Playhouse, was Charles Powlett, third Duke of Bolton, then in his forty-third year. His grace was a man of pleasure well known to the town, and was moreover, as Swift assures us, "a great booby, who does not make any figure at court, or anywhere else." He had, fifteen years before, married the daughter and sole heiress of the Earl of Carberry, with whom he had never lived; and he now found himself desperately in love with Lavinia

Fenton, who was nothing loth to receive his homage or accept his settlement of £400 a-year during his pleasure, and half that amount upon their separation.

Accordingly when, on the 19th of June, in this year, *The Beggar's Opera* was played for the last time during the season, Mistress Fenton made her farewell bow to the public as an actress. So accomplished and agreeable a companion did the duke find her, so well did her wit, sense, and tact delight him, that she retained his affections during the remainder of his life, a space covering some five-and-twenty years. She bore him three sons, and, on the death of his duchess in 1751, he raised her to the peerage. He survived this act but three years. The duchess lived on for six years more, not wholly uncomfortable for his loss; for, being at Tunbridge, as we read in Horace Walpole's Letters, "she picked up an Irish surgeon," to whom, as a memento of their mutual happiness, she bequeathed when dying, the sum of £9,000; to her three sons she left £1,000 each.

By-and-by the *Beggar's Opera* was published, and then, as if to keep its memory fresh, a hot dispute arose regarding its effect on public morals. Swift gave it as his conviction that Gay, "by a turn of humour entirely new, placed vices of all kinds in the strongest and most odious light, and thereby had done eminent service both to religion and morality." The Rev. Thomas Herring, a court chaplain, who afterwards became Archbishop of Canterbury, entirely differed from the dean in his opinion, and even ventured to denounce the opera from the pulpit. Whereon the Irish parson waxed exceeding wroth, and gave vent to his hopes in the third number of *The Intelligencer*, that "no clergyman should be so weak as to imitate a court chaplain who preached against *The Beggar's Opera*, which will probably do more good than a thousand sermons of so stupid, so injudicious, a divine." The argument did not end here; for that worthy justice, Sir John Fielding, declared "many robbers had confessed they had been seduced by *The Beggar's Opera* to begin the commission of those crimes which finally brought them to the gallows."

The great success of the piece inclined John Gay to write another in the same style, a brief mention of which will serve, as an epilogue to *The Beggar's Opera*. Accordingly, next year a second ballad opera entitled *Polly*, a sequel to the first, was

ready for the stage, and great were the expectations it raised throughout the town. But the poet counted without his host; for the ministry, being secretly enraged by the plentiful satire contained in the former entertainment, declined to brook further ridicule from the same pen, and ordered the Lord Chamberlain—his Grace of Grafton—to suppress the new piece. This was regarded by Gay and his admirers as an act of revenge; for the second opera was more decent in its language, and more respectful in its tone to those in high places, than its predecessor. The prohibition was issued without any charge being made against a part or parts of the piece; but later on Gay says he was accused in general terms of having written many disaffected libels, seditious pamphlets, and immoralities, and was informed that his new opera was "filled with slanders and calumnies against particular great persons, and that majesty itself was endeavoured to be brought into ridicule and contempt," of all which dreadful charges he avows himself most innocent in thought, word, and action.

There was yet, however, one card in this game between himself and the Ministry left for him to play. Though the public might not see his opera on the stage there was no law to prevent them reading it in their homes, and accordingly it was sent to press. This was better for Gay, from a pecuniary point of view, than if his piece had been duly produced. For, lacking the wit and humour which his late opera contained, it would probably not have obtained a similar success on the boards, whilst in its published form it was, as the composition of one persecuted by the ministry and neglected by royalty, rapidly subscribed for by a large section of the community then in opposition alike to court and government. Prominent amongst these were the Duchess of Marlborough, who presented him with one hundred pounds for a single copy; Lord and Lady Essex, who gave him many proofs of their interest; and the Duchess of Queensberry, who warmly espoused his cause, liberally subscribed for his work, and carried him to live at the ducal residence in Burlington Gardens. Nay, her grace's enthusiasm on his behalf went still further, for, at one of the drawing rooms at St. James's, she besought the courtiers to subscribe for the opera so obnoxious to royalty. It happened whilst she was engaged in this manner his majesty entered the room, and, noticing how earnestly

she conversed with some officers of the household, enquired the subject of her discourse. Hearing this question her grace answered boldly: "What must be agreeable to anyone so humane as your majesty, for it is an act of charity, and one to which I do not despair of bringing your majesty to contribute."

The king at once understood to what the duchess referred; his face grew crimson with indignation, but he uttered no reply. However, when the drawing room was over one of the vice-chamberlains was despatched to the duchess, with a verbal message from royalty forbidding her presence at court in future. Her grace was a woman of spirit, as was shown by the fact that she no sooner received this command than she sat down, and, "for fear of mistakes," as she said, immediately penned the following epistle, which she bade the vice-chamberlain carry to their majesties without delay:

"The Duchess of Queensberry," wrote she, "is surprised and well pleased that the king hath given her so agreeable a command as to stay from court, where she never came for diversion, but to bestow a great civility on the king and queen; she hopes by such an unprecedented order as this that the king will see as few as he wishes at his court, particularly such as dare to think or speak truth. I dare not do otherwise, nor ought not, nor could have imagined that it would not have been the very highest compliment that I could possibly pay the king to endeavour to support truth and innocence in his house, particularly when the king and queen hath both told me that they had not read Mr. Gay's play. I have certainly done right then to stand by my own word, rather than his Grace of Grafton's, who has neither made use of truth, judgment, nor honour through the whole affair, either for himself or his friends."

Nor did the quarrel end here, for the Duke of Queensberry, much against his majesty's desire, resigned his post as High Admiral of Scotland, and was seen no more at court for many a day. The noise the affair created only served to increase the fame of the new opera and its author. "The inoffensive John Gay," writes Arbuthnot to Swift in a jocular vein, "is now become one of the obstructions to the peace of Europe, the terror of Ministers, the chief author of all the seditious pamphlets which have been published against the government. He

has got several turned out of their places; the greatest ornament of the court banished from it for his sake; another great lady in danger of being chassée likewise; about seven or eight duchesses pushing forward, like ancient circumcelliones* in the church, who shall suffer martyrdom upon his account first. He is the darling of the city, and if he should travel about the country he would have hecatombs of roasted oxen sacrificed to him."

The result of all this was that Gay made over twelve hundred pounds by the sale of his opera, and gained the permanent friendship and protection of the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry, with whom he lived for the remainder of his days.

FATHER CHRYSTAL'S ELIXIR.

A STORY.

"Do not suppose for a moment that the life of a monk in these days is one whit duller than it used to be. Comedy, ay, and for the matter of that, tragedy also, diversifies our daily routine, as was the case when monasteries would be turned into camps and Abbots into generalissimos. No more now, than then, have monks ceased to be human beings. Active brains are still at work in spite of the tonsured crown, and the spirit of mischief is alert within the monastery walls as in the olden time."

Thus spoke my agreeable friend, Father Bartolomæus, Capucin friar, quartered in the French town at which I was staying. We had become acquainted during one of my sketching rambles near his monastery, and soon became the best comrades imaginable. A man of the world, an agreeable talker, keenly observant, and warm-hearted withal, his society was the greatest possible boon to me on my sketching tour.

With him it was out of the question to feel dull for a moment. As for himself, he was always in the highest spirits, and no wonder! Such dire problems as making a fair income out of one's brains, paying rent and taxes, bringing up a young family, starting one's boys in life, finding suitable partners for one's daughters, and all the rest of it, would never whiten his hair or furrow his brow prematurely. Perpetual immunity from every-day anxieties, an existence as easy as that of a blackbird in a well-filled garden, were surely worth the puny sacrifice made in exchange. To for-

* A sect of African heretics smitten with the desire of being martyrs.

swear domestic happiness, to cut an outlandish figure in the eyes of the world, to feel born at the wrong epoch in human history, what mere bagatelles were these! Anyhow Father Bartolomæus looked and acknowledged himself the happiest fellow under the sun.

"Comedy, to begin with. We will leave tragedy for to-morrow," he went on. "Let me relate a comic incident that happened only a few years ago, and for the truth of which I can vouch. You will then see that if we monks weep more freely than you laymen over mortal weaknesses, at least we can laugh with the merriest of you when moved by wit or folly.

"I am now going to tell you a story of the jolliest company, that ever alternated good cheer with fasting and rollicking talk with midnight vigils. Not a mother's son of this brotherhood but was born a wag, and might have got his living by his wits in the Middle Ages as a King's jester or Court fool; or in these as a comic actor. Perhaps a few years of buffetting with the world might have sobered them; but, as it was, their good humour and pleasantry received no check from the first of January to the last day of December. True it is that occasionally high spirits overstepped the bounds of discretion, and fun was apt to become too ebullient for decorum. However, derelictions which are only amenable to such slight punishments as the mumbling of a few extra Paternosters and fasts so-called, are not very dreadful affairs, and indeed, only served to add zest to the daily routine. But for such occasional fillips, existence might have appeared a little flat and insipid. Like certain luscious wines it would have palled upon the appetite. But when was the tide of human affairs ever permitted an unbrokenly calm and even flow? On a sudden this smooth condition of things was brought to an abrupt end. Like a bomb-shell in the midst of the happy fraternity came a piece of evil news.

"Their Superior, a genial, amiable man of the world, a man who loved, if not jollity and carouse, at least comfort and good-fellowship, was transferred to another house. In his place was sent a taciturn, sour, ascetic theologian, who evidently held, like the hermits of old, that the only justifiable existence is one of self-mortification and voluntarily incurred depression of body and mind.

"What were the poor brothers to do?

"Open rebellion against legitimately im-

posed authority was not for a moment to be thought of. No justly founded complaint could they raise. The new Superior did not in any particular exceed his powers or show himself tyrannical. But he was of a morose disposition—there you have the truth in a nutshell!—and nowhere is a morose disposition more out of place than in a monastery.

"Cheerful looks, sprightly speech, to say nothing of wit and pleasantry, seemed a positive affront to this misguided, but doubtless well-intentioned, man. He was probably a martyr to dyspepsia, or perhaps—let me whisper this in your ear—a prey to secret remorse, some saint recently whitewashed from mortal peccadilloes. A jest was odious to him. A smile he turned away from as if it were loathsome. In fact, do what they would, the unfortunate monks found it impossible in his presence to be grave enough; and, although, fortunately for them, they spent a good deal of time out of his sight, they were yet at their wits' end how to arrive at the necessary staidness of demeanour. Especially on days of Church festival, or ceremonials of their own calendar, was the task grievous and painful in the extreme. Upon these occasions the board would be spread more plentifully than usual, generous wines, and even liqueurs, would be handed round, and the pleasures of the table were apt to be long drawn out.

"If then hard for a company of jovial fellows to behave like mutes at a funeral when faring on potatoe soup and haricot beans, washed down with water from the fountain, was it not outrageous, even irrational, to expect them to be down-cast and monosyllabic when bidden to a sumptuous banquet?

"The Superior might frown and look glumness itself, as he tossed off his final glass of ripe old Burgundy or sparkling champagne. The brothers made piteous attempts to put on a rueful countenance and restrain the too ready tongue. All in vain. Eyes sparkled, lips curled upwards, cheeks glowed, as one good story after another elicited roars of laughter. The Superior at last could bear it no longer. Calling the elders of the fraternity before him he remonstrated briefly and tartly.

"Really, well, really, such a state of things was passing belief. High spirits and uproarious mirth were pardonable among a set of schoolboys on the eve of breaking up, but the case of men vowed to a religious vocation was quite different.

Really—ahem—in fact, the long and the short of the matter is, that unless a decorous sobriety of demeanour is at once striven after and attained, all celebrations that have hitherto taken the shape of a festival must be stopped, and fasts, even sterner mortifications of the flesh, be substituted for such indulgences as the canons of their Order not only sanctioned, but encouraged.

"The crestfallen delegates were then dismissed, and the monks took counsel together. For the moment they looked miserable enough. The Superior must have been more than satisfied with such a demeanour, could it be looked upon as lasting. Not much seemed forthcoming in the way of comfort or advice, till, when each member of the conclave had said his say, the youngest of them all, Father Chrystal by name, opened his lips.

"This Father Chrystal was quite a genius, in no common way either. He was not only a good botanist, but a skilful herbalist and simpler, cognizant with the medicinal properties and virtues generally of a vast number of plants. Whenever anyone fell ill inside the monastery walls, or met with an accident, Father Chrystal was the physician sent for. His balms, syrups, decoctions, and miscellaneous remedies brought in quite a little revenue to the house, being known throughout that quarter of France.

"Father Chrystal, with twinkling eyes and countenance unabashed, now unfolded his plan. He had long been in the possession, he said, of an interesting, a most valuable secret, a secret that, were he a civilian and able to indulge in commercial speculation, would certainly make his fortune. More than one unworked mine of gold, indeed, was his. There was not a monk or lay-brother in the house who had not told him that a dozen times. His eye-water, for instance! Patented and sold as a medicine, such a remedy must bring in a handsome income. Then his cure for scalds, burns, and bruises—but, pshaw! these were mere bagatelles, trifles not worth thinking about, at least, talking about just then! A matter much more important had come to the fore.

"Then Father Chrystal began to quote Greek, for, as well as being a first-rate naturalist, he was a fair scholar. They must all have read, he continued, of the wonderful nostrums of the ancients, love-philtres, aphrodisiacs, as the classic writers called them, and so forth. But he had struck out a wholly new line for himself. He had invented an elixir such as the world

had never yet heard of, and which yet in so complex a civilisation as that of the nineteenth century, must have extraordinary value. They were all familiar with the wine that maketh glad the heart of man. But would not the wine that sobered men's spirits have its use also?

"At any rate, it nicely meets our own case," he said. "This day se'nnight is the festival of our patron saint. It will be my turn to act as steward upon that occasion. Mind and drink everything I offer you. A light effervescent wine I shall hand round pretty freely in the draught especially to be indulged in. Whilst tickling the palate and refreshing the body, its effect on the mind is curious and palpable. The first portion imbibed diffuses pensive gravity; empty your glass, and the muscles of the face take a downward curve; drink deep, and you become apparently a prey to intense dejection and melancholy."

"The monks hearkened, all attention, and one and all, with the utmost alacrity, promised to obey. True, their ardour concerning Father Chrystal's elixir was somewhat damped by the fact that it induced mental depression. That was surely uncomfortable enough of itself; nevertheless, the solution of a knotty problem was caught at. What harm, moreover, would a temporary fit of low spirits do them? They would, at least, be spared those far more unpleasant alternatives hinted at by the Superior—rigorous abstinence from wine, an increase of fast days, and, perhaps—who could say?—penances savouring of mediæval harshness. A scourge still formed part of the furniture of every cell, and though it was no more used than the ancestral sword hanging over the mantelpiece of an English mansion, well, there it was!

"The important day came duly round, and the presence of visitors, dignitaries from distant houses, lent additional pomp to the celebration.

"It was indeed an inviting, an appetising board that was spread in the long refectory that day. Trout, fresh from the river; melons in the perfection of ripeness; venison from the adjoining forest; pasties for which that especial region of France was famous; cheese creamiest of the creamy; luscious grapes; in fact, the banquet was princely, aldermanic. On the sideboard a goodly array of bottles promised equal delectation in the way of wines and liqueurs. Well might the Superior, as he passed down the refectory with his guests, cast a satisfied

glance to the right, to the left, and before him; everywhere he saw signs of a feast befitting one of the cheeriest, most hospitable Orders that ever wore the cowl. This religious man, it must be admitted, although his gravity in no wise abated whilst he sat at table, was an excellent trencher-man. Doubtless his appetites were so purged by fasting and prayer that no kind of enjoyment was derived from delicate cates or exquisite draughts, nevertheless he could eat and drink with the merriest gourmet going.

"Grace having been chanted the meal began, Father Chrysal having the wine bottles and the lay-brothers in attendance well in hand. It was his business to-day to give out the contents of the cellar and superintend the procedure of the feast generally, so, whilst contriving to keep up with the rest, he yet rose from time to time to see that his instructions were properly carried out, and even took part in the business of serving.

"Rich in expedients and full of devices, the miracle-working distiller had now a twofold object to attain. He must not only take good care that not a drop of any strong drink, save his own elixir, should moisten the throats of his fellow friars, equally important was it that the Superior and his guests should be plied from other sources. Thus, by an ingenious sleight of hand, he managed to exchange precisely similar bottles on the sideboard, pouring into the glasses of the monks his *Elixir de Douleur*, as he pleasantly styled it, into that of their stern monitor and his friends a beverage of directly opposite properties.

"The result was what had been foretold. In grave and decorous silence the twenty and odd Capucin friars sat down to table, and the Superior almost smiled to see—yes, his rebuke had not been made in vain; no roysterous conversation, no unseemly jests were to shock his sense of propriety and disgrace the Order to which he belonged that day. All was as it should be—demure, decorous, and sobriety itself.

"No sooner, however, did Father Chrysal's elixir begin to circulate freely than gravity was succeeded by pensiveness, pensiveness by gloom, gloom by absolute, dire, lachrymose dejection. One by one the poor monks looked the veriest images of woe; they ate, they drank, it is true, but an outsider might have supposed they were all going to be hanged next day.

"And still the Superior almost smiled to see. It was a very difficult thing to make

this man unbend; even under the influence of sparkling, joy-giving champagne, he could maintain the grave demeanour of a judge. Still to-day the duties of a host necessitated exertion and sacrifice on his part; he must at least make a show of urbanity. He was flattered, moreover, that his subjects, as in a certain sense these friars were, should be so amenable to reason and remonstrance. Thus, although no mood could be farther from hilarity than his own, he looked positively exhilarated by comparison with the brothers. As to his guests, they had been informed beforehand of recent occurrences, and took this openly displayed penitence on the part of the offenders as a matter of course.

"All this time of course Father Chrysal abstained alike from his own elixir and the mellow cup beside it, pride of the monastery cellar. He must be master of himself to the end, or all would be ruined. So he plied now the one bottle, now the other, delighted with the success of his little scheme. There they sat, his once jovial comrades, as he had predicted, silent as mutes at a funeral; if they interchanged a word, it was in monosyllables. They looked neither to the right nor to the left, and ate of the dainty cates placed before them automatically, without relish, apparently without appetite, and when the crowning feature of the entertainment appeared in the shape of a chef d'œuvre of the confectioner's skill, the signal on former occasions of a round of applause, one brother, hitherto the jolliest of the crew, drew out his pocket-handkerchief.

"That pocket-handkerchief brought matters to a climax. No sooner was one brother seen wiping away his tears, than another and another felt an imperative call to weep. Grief is even more contagious than joy. At what should have been the merriest part of the banquet, the monks, one and all, sat sobbing over the delicious morsel served out to them, which they nevertheless contrived to eat all the while. Then at last and indeed, a smile, real, visible, and unmistakable, was visible on the face of the ascetic Superior. The whole scene was so incongruous, so ludicrous, so unexpected, that had he not smiled, he must have been more than human. As to his guests, they feigned a tickling in the throat and tittered behind their handkerchiefs, whilst the poor lay brethren in attendance, overcome with merriment, had hurried pell-mell into the buttery in order to avoid a scandal.

"The only person present who was exactly himself, neither one whit merrier nor sadder, was Father Chrystal. A proud and happy man he felt that moment, and well he might. He had vindicated the honour of his Order, he had foiled the intentions of a crusty Superior, he had proved himself as good as his word. As the party broke up—the monks, with tears running down their cheeks, filing off in one direction; the Superior and his guests, now laughing audibly as they passed through the opposite door; the lay brethren, burbling with fun as they peered from the pantry; Father Chrystal surveyed the scene, triumphant. He stood like some successful stage-manager, contemplating the triumph of his own bringing about, no empty vaunter, no vain trumpeter of his own achievements. His *Elixir de Douleur* was, past question, one of the great inventions of the world."

"And what became of it?" I asked of the narrator.

"It has made the fortune, not of Father Chrystal, but of his house," added Father Bartolomæus. "How could it be otherwise with such a brew? Its vast applicability must at once occur to you. For instance, it is not vouchsafed to all of us to leave behind a host of heart-broken relations. How appropriate, how decorous, Father Chrystal's elixir at certain funeral feasts, when a semblance of grief is obligatory! Again, in public life, it comes in with great handiness and decency. It will often happen that an unpopular functionary is fêted before his departure, and upon such occasions civilians have recourse to this wine in order to squeeze out a tear or two, or when an obnoxious Superior is about to be removed, we monks drink to him in cups that make us seem to lament rather than unseasonably rejoice. As to actors on the stage, it is invaluable to them. By the help of Father Chrystal's elixir they can weep and show extreme dejection in the most natural manner and without the least effort. The clergy of all churches have recourse to it largely, and judges—at least in France—never go on a circuit without it. As to women! Well, you will say I ought to know nothing about them. I may, however, at least tell you what others tell me. They say then that lovers are constantly winning our obdurate mistresses to listen to their suit by help of this precious nostrum. They just imbibe a little, and

their sighs, tears, and melancholy are more than the hearts of the tender sex can resist. Not a daughter of Eve but yields to it. Suppose you make the experiment?"

"You forget," I said, "that I am already a paterfamilias with a host of youngsters all depending on my palette and brush. Fits of dejection come, alas, to me often enough, without needing to resort to artificial means! However, when I am next woe-begone and depressed, I shall think of your story, and I must be very far gone indeed if it does not provoke a smile."

MY LADY'S PICTURE.

IN a corner of the castle—where long shadows dim and dusty

Haunt the footsteps of unwary folk, who climb the turret stair,

Where spiders build and wee mice race, through curtains old and fusty—

Hangs on the wall a picture of a lady tall and fair.

Oft at eventide, when round the Hall sad autumn's winds are sighing,

I come and gaze upon her, as she hangs there all alone,

With brilliant eyes that seem to watch the faint pale sunbeams lying

Asleep below the elm trees black, the walls of mildewed stone.

Or yet I came when spring-tide wakes her gay young troop of flowers,

And the climbing rose beside the gate peeps in the casement old,

When each day springs to greet with joy the crown'd and laden hours,

When every minute sparkles bright—a jewel in the gold!

Yet nothing seems to move her, the quiet old-time lady,

Nothing fades the lovely colour on her soft young blushing cheek.

As she shines upon us from this place so desolate, so shady;

Her coral lips just open—as if she yearned to speak.

None can tell me of her childhood; nay, not one word of her hist'ry

Has lived to tell us who she was, or what her girlish name.

Her life has vanished quite away—a faint, eventless myst'ry;

Yet she herself is handed in this picture down to Fame.

And her beauty smiles upon us, from these walls so grim and hoary.

What matters how she lived and died? Death holds her in his arms!

King Death! who puts the finis to the most enchanting story!

Who claims with kisses for his own, the most bewitching charms.

I wonder if you stand here, close beside me, while I'm talking,

If you long and strive to utter just one whisper of the past!

If in the night time all alone, your pretty ghost goes walking

Down the garden, when the moon's beams are c'er the churchyard cast!

Nay, sleep on, my queen, my lady; life at best is brief, is dreary.
You are better living only in this picture old and sweet.

I think you must have found life out—a shadow, sad and weary!

A courtier waiting hat in hand, each new-born soul to greet.

So faded softly from our ken, and left this picture only,

That can never alter in our sight, nor yet wax old and gray.

'Tis best to hang here ever young, e'en though 'tis somewhat lonely,

Than live to pray each day for night—each weary night for day.

'Twas best to leave us early; life slipped gently from your holding,

For the middle-aged grow bitter, and the old are grudging their place.

And though I leave you, with the night's gray shadows round you folding,

I'll find you here next year the same, with just the self-same face.

CLAUDIA.

A STORY IN FOUR CHAPTERS. CHAPTER II.

ALAS! as Clement grew older, there were fewer of such minutes to lighten the gloomy days. He was not rightly managed, but he was perhaps impossible to manage, with his erratic genius; his facility for temptation; his sensuous, impatient, thoughtless nature, swift to love and to hate, awayed here and there by every gust of impulse. He did no good either at the day or boarding school to which he went, he fascinated half the boys, and fought with the rest, and all the masters, while confessing him capable of almost anything, united in declaring him hopeless. When he was fifteen his father yielded to his passionate wish to be trained for an artist, and took him finally from school, but he had not much hope of his keeping even in this mind, though, as his master allowed, few boys began with so decided a talent—one amounting almost to genius. Dumaresq was steadily patient with him, but it was a hopeless kind of patience, and Clement felt that there was no faith in him behind it. He fancied there was no affection either. Here he was wrong, his father loved him, and would love him doggedly through everything, for he had no changing in him. He led exactly the same life, going every day to his office, doing his secretary work with precision, faithfulness, and skill; always unapproachably polite and even kindly in his intercourse with the men he met, but as absolutely a stranger to them all as if he had met them yesterday; returning at his usual hour to dinner, to an evening spent in his

easy chair with his books, his pipe, his silent, musing contemplation of the Claude which he loved, as he had always loved it, if Clement were out—as he very often was, for as he grew up he made friends, and loved society and gaiety as his father hated it—if he were at home, Dumaresq, who was logical and just, and keenly felt the depressing atmosphere of the home which he could not alter, tried hard to make it more interesting for the lad, who was shooting up fast into a thin, handsome, delicate-looking young fellow, with a look of his mother in his Italian eyes. He persuaded him to play, when he was in the mood, or he interested himself in his drawings; he tried not to be severe and repressive when he talked about his amusements—sympathising he could not be, they were so unlike. Clement was dull at home, he stayed chiefly from a compassionate sense of his father's loneliness, and from a certain love which was the lingering relic of childhood; but sometimes, when one of his melancholy and musing fits came upon him, he found the quiet room resting and a refreshment after the thousand sensations and emotions which he crowded into the days. He did not believe that his father loved him, the father had the same profound disbelief in his son's affections—neither could come any nearer. They wanted the uniting touch of Gemma's sanguine faith in both.

As Clement grew up, and as manly tastes and habits drove out the boyish fancies, a sudden change came in the relationship between them. Louis Dumaresq, when scarcely more than a boy, had been saved from all gross sins and temptations, not only by a fastidious taste and pure nature, but also by falling in love with an innocent, confiding girl. He had gradually forgotten even the flavour of temptation, and had hardened into disgust and contempt for the vices of society. He tried to be just, but it was very difficult for him to comprehend the leaning to "pleasant sin"; he had a woman's coldness and purity in these things. Clement had the Southern temperament, the passionate weakness which is sometimes stronger than strength. He had the corresponding virtues which often balance such natures, he was as compassionate and tender with suffering, with little children, and with frail women, as his father seemed hard and cold. Every one of this sort who came across him adored him; every toddling baby wanted him to take it in his arms; if any of his

friends were ill or in trouble he spent himself on them. He had his mother's soft heart, none of his father's stern strength and uprightness; added to this he had the fatal temperament of genius. What could the poor boy do but go wrong? It would have been almost a miracle if he had kept straight.

Louis Dumaresq distrusted him, it was his habit to do so; but he had no proofs to bring against him till he was more than twenty-one. He had his studio now, which he shared with two friends, and was less at home than ever. His father spent scarcely any of his now not inconsiderable salary on himself: it nearly all went to make a painter of Clement. The young fellow still had lessons, or rather painted under his old master, an artist of some genius and a great deal of skill, a man of the world, shrewd, kindly, and practical. One evening this gentleman called to see Mr. Dumaresq. Clement's father felt that there was a storm in the air. His anxious mind forecast calamity, he only waited for what he was sure was coming. After preliminaries of attempted small talk, Mr. Kennedy cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable. Mr. Dumaresq glanced across at him calmly, with an air of philosophical stoicism which helped on the necessary communication.

"You have something to say about Clement, I fancy?"

"Yes. I thought I ought, as you are obliged to be so much away, and are of course often quite unaware of his doings. I take a great interest in him, as you know. He is the cleverest pupil I ever had, one who ought to do something in life; but I am afraid he is going a bit wrong."

"Yes," Dumaresq said coolly, as if he were discussing a stranger; "and in what direction? You will oblige me deeply by being explicit, Mr. Kennedy."

"Well, he is neglecting his work. He has half a score of pictures unfinished, and hardly works half a dozen hours a week. I am afraid he has taken up with a loose set. I fear he takes more stimulant than he can stand, and you must be aware that neither his excitable brain nor his health can do with that; in the evenings I have reason to believe he often plays in a rather objectionable concert-hall, and I fancy—I am not sure, but I have my fears—there is some entanglement with a girl who sings there. I am very sorry, very much concerned, about all this. He has such promise, and I am fond of the lad."

"I am very much indebted to you for your kindness and confidence," the other said in the same level voice. "I am afraid I have not much influence, but what I can do I will. I was fearing there was something wrong."

"You won't be too severe on him," urged the good-natured, easy-going painter, unconsciously taking the tone of a father appealing to a judge. "There is so much good feeling about him, and no one can help liking him."

"That is just the worst of it. Feeling without principle is only another snare. I will do my best, and I thank you."

As he stood up to go, Mr. Kennedy looked long at the Claude. "You are lucky to have such a gem," he said with the enthusiasm of knowledge. "It is by far the most beautiful specimen I have seen of him. If ever you are hard up, and want to sell, let me know. Lord Enderby would give anything almost for it."

"I shall never part with it. When I go it may be for sale," Mr. Dumaresq answered briefly.

"No, Gemma," he said to himself as he stood before the hearth alone, "I shall keep your legacy as long as I live; it may be the only thing left me of my old life with you some day. Your other legacy will give me many a heartache yet."

He went out that very evening in some hope of finding Clement at the studio where he slept occasionally, as he had not come home. He was not there, however; there was nothing but confusion and silence in the great untidy room covered with a litter of artistic properties, uncleaned palettes, unfinished sketches, tobacco pipes, and the lay figure standing in an outrageous attitude, with a soft felt hat cocked rakishly over one of her eyes. The violin-case was gone. This was a significant fact after what Mr. Kennedy had said. Mr. Dumaresq hesitated a few minutes over his next step, and decided suddenly upon it. He went to Mr. Kennedy's house, and sent up a note asking for the name of the concert-hall he had mentioned. On receiving it he took a hansom at once, and went there. He had never entered such a place in his life; but out of the atmosphere of smoke and bright gas and general rowdiness he took away some distinct impressions. One, the first that forced itself upon him, was the individuality of one of the singers; he felt, he knew not why, that this was the girl of whom Mr. Kennedy had spoken. She was small, plump,

and pretty, with a cloudy frizz of golden hair round an almost childish, not at all bad, face. She was not in any way immodest or objectionable; she looked, on the contrary, fresh to it all and half frightened. She had a sweet, clear voice like a lark's, worthy of something better than the silly comic song; which was not, however, worse than silly. She seemed now and then to glance off the stage; there was an air of consciousness about her as if some one were watching her. Dumaresq knew who it was when Clement came from that direction, looking flushed, excited, handsome, with his violin. His father groaned inwardly, and let his head fall on his breast. Gemma's boy here, and like this! He played an odd, wild, eerie sort of tune, getting faster and faster till it finished in a kind of skirl. He was applauded, but not half as much as the pretty girl, whom the people round about called "Tillie."

Mr. Dumaresq wrote on a bit of paper the following words:

"I have heard you play here to-night, and have seen Mr. Kennedy. I must ask you to come to-morrow evening if I do not see you before then.—L. D."

Folding this note, and directing it, he made his way out, and leaving the note with the doorkeeper to give to his son, he went home. He did not put any of his sensations into shape; he took up this new trouble with stern patience, as he had accepted his others, half proud of his power of self-control. He expected nothing but misery in life, he told himself, and nothing now could take him by surprise; but he meant to do what he could for the boy, for his mother's sake. He more than half despised him, but there was, after all, a tenderer thought at the bottom. He tried to foster this by looking at the sepia sketch, which Clement had made years ago to please him, that evening when he played the little air which he had christened the "Claude," after the picture. "There is good in him, there's good in him," the father repeated as he held the sketch before his eyes. "If his mother had lived it might have come to more. I never could get any hold upon him. That is part of the curse that has been upon me since she went."

CHAPTER III.

THE following evening, after a solitary and barely-tasted dinner, Louis Dumaresq sat stern, silent, and immovable, awaiting, with that resolute patience with which he

steeled his spirit, the visit he had demanded from his son. The room was but dimly lighted; his face was in deep shadow by the picture above his head, over the sunshine of which a sudden eclipse seemed to have fallen. Nine, ten, eleven o'clock came. Dumaresq had told himself it was no use; Clement meant to keep away; but just as he was putting his watch back in his pocket he heard the door-bell, and then a minute afterwards a stumbling step up the stairs, a rattle at the handle, and the young man came in. He was highly flushed, his eyes had a strange glitter; he seemed to bring in with him an odour of cigars and wine. A keen shiver of repulsion and disgust, a pain like a knife ran through his father's heart as he looked at him steadily with a pale, cold face, as utterly dissimilar to the other as it is possible for father's and son's to be. His voice sounded clear, cutting, and steady as he said:

"Sit down, Clement, I have a good deal to say to you."

"Thanks, I'd rather stand," the other said with a reckless laugh, leaning his elbow on the mantel-piece and looking at Dumaresq with a defiant, sneering face. It was champagne that inspired the recklessness and the sneer. An hour or two hence despondency and self-hatred might take their place.

"I can't stay long; they are waiting for me. We've got a supper party on; but I thought I'd better come round and see what you wanted."

"It was very kind of you," the other said with a curious little smile. The tolerance, the kindness he had been trying to force upon himself had vanished in the long, dreary waiting. He felt now almost an abhorrence of the dissipated lad. "And from whom have you come to honour me so far?"

"From the concert hall in — Street," the other retorted fiercely. "Where you followed me, I suppose, last night."

"Do you go there then, every evening? And what is your attraction in such an utterly mean, vulgar, and inconceivably stupid place of amusement?"

"Everyone is not like you. I don't suppose you were ever young and fond of pleasure."

"Is that pleasure? I beg your pardon; it did not strike me in that light! So you go only for the pleasure you find there—the refined songs, the costumes, and general tomfoolery. I should hardly have thought it could be so fascinating even to twenty-

two years humanity. Certainly, if that is enjoyment, I never should have found it—not even when I was young. So there is no special attraction?”

There was a moment's silence; the two stared at each other. On the one side with looks of cold, averse displeasure, on the other with fierce but half-frightened glances. Clement broke suddenly on the stillness in a hoarse voice, from which all the music seemed departed. “Yes—there is—I'm not going to beat about the bush, for I believe you know. There's a girl there I'm in love with—I can't get on without her.”

“A young person with frizzled hair, who sings idiotic nonsense?” his father said in a low, iced tone, stroking his thin, hollow cheek with a hand that trembled.

“Don't provoke me,” the young man burst out with a sudden blaze of fury. “I'm half mad to-night—I can't stand much.”

“More than half drunk,” his father returned with contempt. “Let's make an end of this. You are going to the bad, or gone; you are throwing away time, money, talent, opportunity; you are going the path that ends in perdition. I can't stop you; I can't help it. I've done what I could for you—everything. I have kept myself straight that you might have every chance. I've borne and forborne. What is it you want now? What delirium of folly has got hold of you?”

“I want money; I must have money,” the boy cried fiercely, the wine firing his brain; the coldness and scorn in his father's looks and voice helping it to madden him, and make his moods into a fury almost insane. “Everyone says you have heaps of it, and I must have it.”

“I have kept myself on the verge of poverty that you should have enough,” the other returned bitterly. “I cannot give what I have not; and if I could I would not—to dissipate on sots and loose women!”

Clement started forward with an oath; he held up his cane almost as if he would strike his father, who looked at him coolly, without a muscle quivering in his fine white face.

“You cannot threaten it out of me,” he said in a voice unlike his own.

Clement let his arm fall a moment, and turned half away. As he did so his glance caught on the Claude over the mantel-piece; he pointed at it with his stick.

“You ask where you can get money,” he said sneeringly. “If you cared to save

me at the expense of your hobby, there are thousands, they say, locked up in that picture.”

“You think I would sell my Claude for you and your fancy for a low girl?”

The words were scarcely out of his lips, when, in a moment, a thing was done that left its mark on both their lives for ever.

Clement himself did not realise what the madness of the drunken impulse of the instant had done till he saw that the picture—his mother's heirloom—was for ever ruined, thrust through and through with a madman's frenzy of destruction.

He stood still as a statue, staring at his work, white and cold, and sobered with a ghastly shock of shame. As for his father, he sat motionless, not speaking, looking silently at the destruction of the comfort and hope of his life; not the destruction of the picture, but the destruction of something a thousand times dearer and more sacred. The boy Gemma had left him—this too was a ruin, like the stabbed canvas. The thrust seemed to him to have gone through his heart as well. Strangely enough, though, all the contempt, all the disgust were gone; only a vast pity and an unavailing ache of forgiveness remained; but he could not speak, his tongue, which had lighted readily enough on reproach, was still and dumb. Before he could move or say a word, the room was empty; Clement had turned, as if he felt the lash of the Furies, and was gone. His father started after him, called in vain. One door after another slammed, and Dumaresq was alone, standing stricken under the ruined picture—the type of the disaster and dismay which had come upon him in a moment.

“All that she left me, all that she left me!” he groaned out, stretching his arms above his head with a piteous appeal to the darkness and silence. “Was it for this I was born? O Gemma, my Gemma, why did you leave us to such a life as this?”

VICTIMS.

By THEO GIFT.

Author of “*Lil Lorimer*,” “*An Alibi and its Price*,”
Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER XV. THE COUNT MOVES.

MARSTLAND was gone, leaving Vera the one small legacy of comfort he had been able to bequeath—the knowledge of his love and fidelity. And about the same time she began to find out a minor consolation for herself, in the fact of the Comte de Mailly's friendship, and to feel

glad or disappointed according as he came or stayed away.

For one thing, home was a much less pleasant place than formerly. True, her father did not say much more to her on the subject of her poor little love affair. Perhaps he thought it more politic to treat it as an unpleasant and humiliating incident, well over, and best forgotten. But his late illness had neither improved his nerves nor his temper; and the former had received an unpleasant shock from the alarming alteration in his friend de Mailly's manner of receiving news of Vera's unexpected outburst of independence.

Madame, wiser in her generation, would rather have kept the whole matter a secret, and simply announced that her daughter's return from England, sooner than had been expected, obliged them to cut short their own visit to the Count's Southern estates, and return to Les Châtaigniers to receive her; but M. St. Laurent's irritable nerves, and the wrath aroused in him by young Marstland's letter, utterly prevented him from keeping such a secret from the man who was at once his host and his best friend; and he was only brought to a sense of his folly by observing the almost livid rage which swept across the Count's visage as the full meaning of the tidings took root in his mind.

"Unlucky chance!" he repeated after his guest, with a laugh fierce and bitter enough to awe even the latter into composure. "'Unforeseen, girlish folly'! Mais non, mon cher, there is nothing of chance or unforeseen in this. It is a design, a plan to rob me of my rights; and I will tell you of whom—of Madame! Madame has always been the enemy of my pretensions. She submitted to them for her own interests, see you, as long as they were in the remote future; but from the moment that Mdlle. Vera is grown up, is become a charming woman, she endeavours to hold me back. She even makes an excuse, affronting to myself and to my family, for sending her daughter away out of the country, and exposing her to the impertinent amours of foreign adventurers, and all because she detests me. My step-mother offended her once, and her jealousy of my friendship with you completes the offence, so that she would gladly sacrifice Mdlle. Vera to anyone of her own shop-keeper nation, even though—for, yes, certainly, it must come to that if one is betrayed—even though it were to be at the price of her husband's ruin."

"But, mon ami—but, my dear de Mailly, I entreat, I implore you to hear me," cried M. St. Laurent, all his own anger and excitement quelled before the expression in his friend's face, and the threat whose full meaning he comprehended only too well. "You are not just, Madame—it is only that you do not understand the English manner—Madame is devoted to you. She recognises in you the saviour of our house, and she is in despair. She overwhelms herself with reproaches at this moment for the imprudence which has exposed you, as well as ourselves, to the affront of this young man's temerity."

The Count smiled contemptuously.

"A despair easy of consolation, mon cher, as you will find when you have married Mdlle. Vera to this young——"

"But, de Mailly, permit me! Either you are laughing or you exaggerate enormously. What question of marriage is there in the absurdity we are discussing? These Jewish people have taken advantage of Vera's presence in their house to present this adventurer to her; and the innocent child, who, as you will recall to yourself, is not even aware of the honour you have done her, has not had sufficient hardness to refuse him permission to address her. She writes to her mother for counsel and protection, and we reclaim her instantly, and forbid these Joséphs and their friends ever again to intrude on our society. Voilà, mon ami! what would you more? These little contretemps are annoying, but one must have reason. It is too much condescension to regard them seriously."

It was plain that M. St. Laurent had already forgotten how seriously he was regarding the "contretemps" in question, at the moment when his friend's entrance afforded him an outlet for his irritation; but, if the Count had a better memory, he perhaps allowed it to remind him that his guest was more easily worked into a rage than the generality of men; and that the risk of being cheated out of his bargain might not after all be so great as he had at first imagined. He would fain have seen Vera's letter to her mother so as to assure himself that the young lady—who had never seemed so desirable to him as in the moment when he was threatened with losing her—was really as indifferent to her new suitor as her father endeavoured to persuade him. But courtesy forbade him to demand what was not offered; and he allowed himself by slow degrees to be

pacified, and even to consent to the substitution of Joanna for either the father or mother of the girl who was to be fetched home without a moment's delay. Not even to them, however, did he state that he intended to superintend in person the safe reclamation of his betrothed.

A wise man will oft succeed in extracting a victory from a reverse; and the Comte de Mailly was wiser, as men go, than his friend Laurent. Quite convinced that he had read Madame aright, and that the English visit had been a successful piece of strategy for the express purpose of baffling his desire to curtail the period of his probation, he was determined now to draw from that very defeat and the mortification attending it, the weapons by which to triumph more decisively in the future. St. Laurent's helpless dependence on him and terror of his displeasure made him virtually master of the situation, and when he consented to allow his wounded pride to be appeased, he did so on the clear understanding that his rights and interests in Vera were to be recognised as at least as strong as those of her parents; and that therefore it lay with him now to throw them up, or carry them out, according to his own pleasure.

It may be imagined, therefore, that when Vera had returned, and the Count neither wrote nor came to Les Châtaigniers, M. St. Laurent felt profoundly uneasy. He was acquainted now with the fact of his friend's excursion, and questioned Joanna closely on the subject; but she assured him that, though the Count had certainly endeavoured to ascertain from her what Dr. Marstrand was like, and whether Mademoiselle showed emotion at parting from him, her reply that Mademoiselle seemed to care a great deal more about bidding good-bye to Miss Josephs than anyone else; and that the young man had not even been present at the final farewells, had appeared perfectly satisfactory to him, and probably served as an explanation of Vera's woe-begone appearance at the railway station. Then St. Laurent wrote to his friend, telling him humorously of the presumptuous lover's visit and rout, asking when they should see their late host at Les Châtaigniers; and adding that his enlivening society would be a boon to all there, not excepting "la petite," who naturally felt the separation from her adored Mees Joséphs after the manner of young girls. The Count answered courteously but briefly,

excusing himself for a day or two longer on the plea of a business visit from his lawyer, and making no mention of Vera at all, beyond the usual formal recommendations at the end of the letter. M. St. Laurent felt almost frantic, and did his best to make his wife so into the bargain.

"You see, is it not so, Madame? you see now what you have done," he observed in private to that much-suffering woman. "He is disgusted. He sees through the 'chansons' of that Jeanne of yours, who is a fool like the rest of her countrywomen; and he wills to have no more to do with the girl. Do you mark that line in his letter, 'my lawyer is with me'? Ah, perhaps at this moment even his lawyer is advising him to call in his loans; and tomorrow he will write, 'Our compact is over. Pay me therefore the money that I have advanced you.' And thou, thou whose obstinacy has done this, dost thou know what that means? We have no money to pay; therefore we shall have to leave Les Châtaigniers. The Count will add it to the Mailly estate; and we, when we have sold everything for food and have no more, we shall be reduced to picking up rags in the streets of Paris! Ah! the accursed day that I ever went to a certain girls' school there!"

It must be owned that Monsieur's manners were not Parisian, and that Madame in marrying him had not made for herself a bed of roses. Naturally, perhaps, she retaliated on Vera by an air of chilly displeasure, which, in conjunction with her father's irritability, made the contrast between this gloomy home and the happy, affectionate one she had so lately left, seem still sharper to the girl; and but for the possession of her lover's letter, read and kissed twenty times a day, she would hardly have known how to endure it.

She had two letters to comfort her now; the second a hastily-scribbled note in answer to hers, and sent through P'tit Jean, the wedding-boy, who, being Bénéite's cousin, had been easily persuaded to act the part of Mercury. But in it, while thanking and blessing his sweet-heart for the goodness of her letter to him, Marstrand said frankly that he would not set her parents further at defiance, or endanger her home happiness, by asking her to keep up any correspondence with him during their term of waiting; unless, indeed, some unforeseen trouble should cause her to require his help or presence, in which case he entreated her to write to

him at once, and he would answer or come to her without a moment's delay.

"I am your servant now for life," he wrote; "but I do not want to be a selfish servant, or to exact favours which might bring a shadow of discomfort to my darling little mistress." And Vera, reading it, wondered in her heart of hearts whether there was ever before a lover so good, or who wrote so sweetly.

It was the tenth evening since her return home, and the day had been so wet and windy that a tiny wood fire burned upon the hearth in deference to Madame's rheumatism, an ailment to which she had been very subject since the long night-watches consequent on her husband's illness. The Count had not yet called; and Monsieur was in a worse temper than ever, so that the poor child was glad to escape from the vicinity of the *bélique*, and, under cover of warming her despised fingers, to ensconce herself in a low chair by the fire, and seek a refuge from the present in memories half sad, but wholly sweet, of the past. Poor little Vera! Even Mr. Lucas, even those three hours' penance in the punt, became glorified by the light of memory, and she wondered with indignant remorse how she could ever have grumbled at them.

A sudden burst of voices in cheerful greeting startled her from these meditations, and she rose hurriedly to find that the Comte de Mailly was in the room, and receiving quite a little ovation of welcome from both her parents. Even her mother, so indifferent to him usually, was smiling and holding out her hand quite warmly; while M. St. Laurent seemed to have cast away all his gloom and peevishness in a moment, and embraced his friend with effusion, not altogether unmingled with something like affectionate reproach for having left them so long to themselves.

The Count took his welcome very quietly, but even Vera could not help noticing how unusually well and cheerful he looked. He was always carefully got up; but to-day he had an air of being particularly well dressed and even young, which latter was certainly not one of his usual characteristics.

"Thanks, thanks, my friend," he said briskly. "Business, that frightful business, has been the only thing that has kept me from visiting you and your charming home sooner. But how has my dear Madame been, since she did me the honour of being my guest? And you, too, St. Laurent, are you quite recovered now? No, no; do

not disturb your game, I entreat you. I see you are still in the middle of it, and if you permit me while you finish to pay my homage to Mdlle. Vera, whom I have not seen for so long, I shall be spared the desolation of interrupting you."

He crossed the room as he spoke, without waiting for the permission; nor indeed giving much heed to it as M. St. Laurent called after him in tones so amiable that his daughter hardly recognised them:

"But assuredly, assuredly, my friend. Vera, ma mie, entertain our good neighbour while the mamma and I finish, since he permits us, our little game."

Vera had given the Count her hand, and as he looked at her (his eye had indeed been on her from the moment of his entrance) he was thinking how infinitely her late experience of life, however short, nay even the added expression in her sad eyes, and the wistful droop of her sweet young mouth, added to the new grace of womanliness about her; also, how much more prettily dressed she was than of old, in a softly-draped gown of some deep terracotta-coloured material, trimmed with ruffings of lace, and bought and made under Leah's tutelage.

"To think that Madame's intrigues nearly cost me this!" was the thought in his mind, indicated by a sudden hardening about the lines of the mouth, even while he was asking in his softest tones after the girl's health, and expressing his pleasure at meeting her again after her lengthy absence. "An absence, however," he added gallantly, "which doubtless seems less long to Mdlle. Vera than to the friends it deprived of her society."

Vera blushed faintly. If her father had not been in the room she would have liked to say that to her it seemed only too short. As it was she faltered a little, and then answered, with an awkwardness which was unconsciously flattering:

"You were away, too, Monsieur."

"Yes, truly, at my estate in the South with your amiable parents latterly, and before that at Dieppe, where the bathing season was altogether charming this year, and where my step-sisters were beyond measure afflicted at hearing you were not to join them. They overflow with jealousy of that Mdlle. Josépha, who they declare has stolen all your affections. Let me trust you left her in good health."

The Count was persistent in returning to the subject of Vera's visit, in hopes of discovering from her looks whether her

feelings had really suffered in it; but he did so with such an air of cheerful innocence that the girl, lifting her wistful, questioning eyes to him, fancied that he really spoke in ignorance of all that had happened to her.

"She was very well when I came away," she answered in a low voice, and added, as her eyes filled with uncontrollable tears, "I do miss her very much. I cannot help it."

"My dearest mademoiselle, who could be unnatural enough to wish you to do so?" cried the Count, leaning forward in his chair and speaking with quite refreshing warmth. "Surely the power of attaching oneself quickly and tenderly to another person is one of the loveliest privileges of youth and trustfulness. Even I felt the influence of Mdlle. Josephs's fascinations, and should be delighted at any time to renew the agreeable acquaintance I formed with her. Perhaps next year, indeed, she might be induced——" But he broke off there, as Vera gave an involuntary shake of her head at the thought of how little chance there was of her parents forgiving Leah by that time, and added in a tone of playful reproach: "Only Mdlle. Vera has too large a heart, I am sure, to be content with favouring one friend at the expense of others. She will keep a corner for Eulalie and Alphonsine, and for—others who, if not as meritorious as the talented Mdlle. Josephs, have at least the claim of old and faithful friendship."

"Oh, but I do, indeed," said Vera simply. "I often spoke to Leah of the time I spent at Mailly, and of your sisters, though I thought they would hardly remember me now that it is so long since we have seen one another. When are they coming to the Château again, Monsieur, and is it true that they do not like Finisterre?"

The Count burst out into protestations. His step-sisters adored the country of their birth. It was only their mother, who since her husband's death shrank from staying in the house which his memory still pervaded; and as there was no lady there to play hostess to the poor girls and chaperon them, it was difficult for them to come. Still, he must urge his stepmother to make the effort soon, as otherwise Alphonsine would not even be able to bid adieu to her old home before entering into religion; since she had decided (had Mdlle. Vera heard of it?) to begin her novitiate in the following June at the Convent of the

Sacré Cœur in Paris, where she had been educated.

"And will she be a nun, then?" exclaimed Vera, a sentiment of almost shocked pity banishing even her shyness. "Oh, poor Alphonsine! But why?"

"Ah, Mademoiselle, you, happily for the world you adorn, have never experienced that mysterious thing a vocation, which makes the 'why' for such a sacrifice possible even to a beautiful young woman. Alphonsine acts of her own free choice, and it is only in deference to the tears and entreaties of her mother and sister that she has consented to wait until her twenty-fourth fête day before entering a religious life, to which, indeed, she has been 'vouée' ever since her thirteenth year."

Vera listened with wide-open eyes full of astonishment and interest. It was quite startling to her to hear that her old playmate was voluntarily choosing what had never been held up to her except as a threat involving dark and mysterious terrors; but she found the Count's talk very agreeable, especially after the gloom and dulness of the last ten days, and answered to it much as a flower beaten down by the rain will lift its little head gratefully to the first gleam of sunshine. She had never talked to the Count so much in all her life before.

The game of *bélique* came to an end at last. It had been protracted as far as even M. St. Laurent's strictly Gallic sense of the proprieties would permit; but even *bélique* must be won or lost some time or another; and the capture of Madame's last ten was the finale of the Count's little tête-à-tête by the fire. He did not attempt to prolong it; indeed, he was quite man of the world enough to know that it never does to overdo even a success—and that his visit had been one so far, he felt assured. For the rest of it he devoted himself to his host and hostess with undiminished, if more sober, zest, and departed earlier than was his wont, leaving a sudden sense of dulness and blank behind him.

That evening Madame St. Laurent gave Vera a more affectionate kiss than usual in bidding her good-night, and Monsieur, while bending his cheek for his daughter's salute, patted her shoulder good-naturedly, asking:

"Eh, well, art thou less cold at present, little frog?"

Poor, innocent Vera went to bed, thanking the Count in her heart, and hoping sincerely that he would come again on the

following evening, if his mere presence was so efficacious in restoring her parents' good-humour. She was able for once to read her lover's two precious letters without weeping over them!

The Count did not come on the morrow. Perhaps he guessed he would be wished for, and stayed away to let the wish grow stronger; but a day or two later as Madame St. Laurent and Vera were taking a walk along the stretch of wide breezy moorland extending between Ste. Tryphine and Mailly, they heard the tramp of a horse on the hard, springy turf behind them, and the next moment were overtaken by the Count, who explained that he had just been calling at Les Châtaigniers, and, hearing in which direction the ladies were walking, had made bold to overtake them. He dismounted accordingly, and walked at their side, chatting lightly and pleasantly, and actually going back a few steps once to cut a spray of red-bellied heather and white blackberry blossom which Vera paused to admire. The girl blushed crimson at the idea of his taking so much trouble for her; but the Count protested that the pleasure of serving a charming young lady was an honour into the bargain, and, while paring the stalks with his penknife before presenting them to her, added with vivacity:

"But since Mademoiselle is fond of flowers she ought to honour me still more by seeing the magnolias at Mailly. Even strangers come from a distance to admire them, and just now they are in full perfection. Will not Madame St. Laurent generously fix a day to come with her husband and daughter to lunch at the Château, and inspect these floral triumphs?"

Madame coloured, hesitated, and stammered. She was really trying, though with painful ill-success, to mask her old stiffness and dislike under a thin veil of cordiality; but the Count did not seem to notice the effort, and as he put the flowers in Vera's hands ventured to gently press her fingers, saying:

"I shall leave my cause with Mademoiselle. She will be on the side of the magnolias, I am sure. One white flower sympathises with another."

"Mamma, how poetical the Count is getting!" Vera exclaimed as soon as he was gone; and Madame so far forgot policy as to answer with some irritation:

"He is getting very silly, I think. I can't bear with poetry in a man."

Vera was silent for a moment, and then said quite simply:

"Well, I think it does sound rather silly in so old a man as he."

And Madame immediately repented herself vigorously. She would have done so still more, if she had known that her daughter was thinking how differently the compliment would have sounded if Maratland had paid it to her.

They went to the lunch all the same. Madame knew indeed that the invitation had only to reach her husband's ears to be accepted; and Vera certainly enjoyed the little dissipation. Comparatively near neighbours as they were she had not even been inside the grounds of Mailly for nearly three years; and the Count felt a secret triumph at seeing the shy delight in her face as she first came in sight of the great pride of the Château, a row of magnolia trees on the south side of the building, all in full bloom, the magnificent cream-white blossoms loading the air with perfume, and contrasting grandly with the deep polished green of the large leaves. She did not, indeed, talk or eat much at the grand luncheon which followed; but there was an air of languid content in the very way in which she sat at the luxuriously spread board, looking from the display of glass and silver on it to the lovely view of orchard, and meadow, and far-away sun-sparkled sea, visible through the deep-set window facing her; and the Count smiled grimly to himself at the thought that he had merely to bide his own time and this fair, soft creature, so long marked down for himself, would bow her young head to his sceptre, and accept with naïve gratitude the position of châteline over his superb demesne.

A well-laid plan and a promising one; for Vera, finding what a decided difference the Count's visits and civilities made to her, daily grew to look forward to them with frank pleasure, and meet him with the shy, sweet smile due to an acknowledged friend; so that M. St. Laurent, seeing how smoothly things were working, began to think that sufficient time had been wasted on preliminaries, and to grow impatient to bring the affair to an end. He was a man of too tyrannical a nature to have patience for such slow and feeble weapons as policy and management for carrying out his will. To his mind Vera had been shown quite sufficient indulgence already, and the apparent passiveness with which she had submitted to the edict against her English admirer, deceived him as completely as it had done the Count,

and made him contemptuous of any further need for working on her feelings before the final move. In truth he was a much injured man at the present moment; for de Mailly, having suddenly conceived the idea that to pose as the elderly friend of the elderly father is not the best way to awaken a sentimental interest in the daughter, objected to returning to the regular whist evenings and other formal customs of old times; but made his visits at capricious and uncertain intervals, sometimes letting nearly a fortnight pass without one, sometimes coming two days running, sometimes bearing a bouquet or a new piece of music for Vera; but always disregarding with brutal selfishness the entreating glances at the whist-table which poor M. St. Laurent kept persistently casting.

As a consequence the latter's temper became more irritable day by day, and as the colour of his wife's spirits generally reflected his, life at Les Châtaigniers seemed even duller to poor Vera than it had been before Leah's advent. Indeed, she had fewer distractions than ever now; for Madame St. Laurent's rheumatism kept her very much at home this autumn, while the late visitation of typhus in the household had frightened their few acquaintances out of any eager desire to invade them. So poor Vera, living on memories of her brief sojourn "in Arcadia;" longing for a sight of her lover's face or Leah's, or even a word or line from either of them; could have cried for loneliness at times, and was ready to welcome the Count or any other friend with a kind word or a pleasant look for her as a relief from it. Perhaps the greatest friend she had at present was Benoite's friendly smile and bright eyes beaming with knowingness and sympathy from under her square white cap when they chanced to meet; but even this comfort Vera dared not go out of her way to seek, for fear of exciting suspicion and so depriving herself of the one ally she possessed. It was only now and then that she ventured to exchange more than a word in passing with the kindly blanchisseuse.

Other confidante she had none. In justice to the girl it must be said that she did at first try, in a feeble, tentative way, to make one of her mother; and, while still under the influence of the loving, almost sisterly familiarity between good Mrs. Josephs and her daughters, did really put

forth more than one effort at drawing nearer to the parent of whose love for her, despite the coldness of her manner, she thought she felt sure. But she made her attempt badly, more especially in thinking she could forward it by praises of that Jewish mother across the Channel, of Leah's home virtues and Naomi's children; and Madame St. Laurent, secretly devoured with jealousy of all these people for the hold they had acquired over her daughter's affections, listened coldly and answered depreciatingly. Vainly, but bitterly, she repented ever having let Vera leave her for the country to which she had belonged, and never more so than when the girl, fresh from recollections of the Josephs's family circle, friends and relatives, would ask innocently natural questions as to what part of England her mother's family came from, and whether she had no friends and relatives living there now. "I asked you, mamma, in my letters; but you forgot to answer me," Vera said, and got short answer then. That miserable, vulgar mystery, the false and petty shame for her own parentage and upbringing, kept up so long before her own daughter, held the mother silent and reserved still, even on subjects which might otherwise have been most natural and pleasant to her; while her consciousness of Vera's unsuspecting ignorance of the way in which she was even then being disposed of made her nervously anxious to check, rather than invite, the least approach to confidence on the subject of the young lover whom this very disposal rendered it necessary to brush out of the girl's memory.

Quite suddenly the Count moved. Once or twice, perhaps, he had allowed a shade of something more than friendly warmth, a slight liberty of gaze, a longer pressure of the hand to invade the bland and courteous prudence of his demeanour when with the young girl; and Vera had shrunk back instantly, startled only perhaps the first time, but with unmistakable flinching and repugnance on the latter occasions. A little while ago she might have let these manifestations pass without notice or question; but those who have even nibbled at the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge get to know the colour of its leaves, and to tremble without even understanding. The Count felt that he had been repulsed, and, piqued and disgusted, determined to move all the quicker. He saw M. St. Laurent alone the very next day.

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